

## Imagining Home: Writing From the Midwest

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1998 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

"Imagining Home: Writing From the Midwest." *The Annals of Iowa* 57 (1998), 180-181.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10167>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

The most emotionally charged sections describe his mother and father. Eva, who married at sixteen, devoted her entire life to her growing family of four children, and always subordinated herself to her husband's wishes. Tom, a "tough old bastard" (20), tightly controlled his emotions until they exploded in fits of profanity and violence. Like his wife, he worked himself to the bone, eking out a meager living by running a livery stable. Young Paul's love-hate relationship with his father forms the emotional core of the book.

If Engle remains ambivalent about his father, his evocation of the social context surrounding his family is largely nostalgic, even sentimental. Chapters on Memorial Day, the fabulous Fourth of July, the Iowa State Fair, Thanksgiving, and old-fashioned Christmases recapture the mood and feel of a distant time. The drugstore where he dispensed drugs, perfume, and ice cream sodas, he realized later, actually constituted "a window into the whole area" (37). But in a chapter titled "Those Damn Jews" he portrays the dark side of his home town and its potential for bigotry and hate.

A wonderfully descriptive chapter on "The Glory of the Senses" provides clues to the highly developed qualities of observation that helped lead to Engle's later success as a writer. He calls up in memory the sights, sounds, feels, and—most impressively—the smells of the town. Another clue to his future career lay in his eager reading of the magazines on the rack of the drug store where he worked. For insight into the career of one of our most important midwestern writers and into the qualities of small-town life during the early 1900s, *A Lucky American Childhood* is highly recommended.

*Imagining Home: Writing from the Midwest*, edited by Mark Vinz and Thom Tammaro. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. xii, 212 pp. \$19.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS K. DEAN, MOORHEAD STATE UNIVERSITY

*Imagining Home* is a fine follow-up to Mark Vinz and Thom Tammaro's successful anthology of midwestern literature, *Inheriting the Land*. This collection, taking a narrower approach, assembles exclusively essays focusing on the topic of home, which is increasingly important in an age of transience and disconnection, and how that concept manifests itself in the Midwest. The selection of authors ranges from those raised in the Midwest and still living there, to those who have left and transplants. Contributors include nationally known writers such as Kathleen Norris and Jon Hassler, and more regional figures

such as Robert Schuler and Mary Swander. The anthology is divided into three thematic categories: "Discovering a Home," "Recovering the Past," and "The Changing Present."

A number of the essays are comfortably predictable, focusing on traditional impressions of midwestern landscapes and remembrances of childhood home life. Topics range beyond these as well, with Bill Holm focusing on Minnesota's political identity and Kent Meyers brilliantly teasing out the relationships between community and cultural land use designations. A couple of essays challenge nostalgic temptation. Vinz and Tammaro let Carol Bly talk about how "being crazy about some remembered place is a dumb emotion" (164) in the face of inequities in class and privilege; and, in the most provocative essay in the collection, the editors turned David Haynes loose on his St. Louis lower-middle-class neighborhood of Breckenridge Hills with an essay that runs the gamut of reactions from ambivalence to hate to understanding. Haynes, an African American, is the only non-white voice in the collection, the book's major weakness. The diversity of topical approaches and range over urban, suburban, and rural landscapes would have been complemented well by a broader ethnic sweep.

Three essays are of particular interest to Iowans. Michael Martone contributes an essay called "The Flyover" about his years teaching at Iowa State University, making cogent observations about the paradox of isolation and strong connection to the essentials of earthly existence that characterizes midwestern life. David Allan Evans's "From the Pole Vaulter's Bluff" demonstrates that "even in Iowa" there is ethnic and class diversity in towns such as Sioux City where he grew up, and discusses the primacy of a writer's formative life in place and home. I found Mary Swander's "The Roosting Tree," a selection from her book *Out of This World*, among the most delightful essays in the collection, not only for its powerful evocation of her homes in Manning, Iowa City, and Kalona, but also for the complex exploration of the contradictory impulses of pulling up stakes and putting down roots, ultimately showing us the importance of nature, history, and cultural relationships to a sense of home and a sense of place.

Vinz and Tammaro's collection rewards us with familiar pictures of midwestern experience, and, like a good midwesterner, also quietly insists on its depths, complexities, and diversity. I hope that the volume inspires other midwesterners of all backgrounds to explore their own imaginings of home.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.